

The honoree was reluctant.

But what other name could possibly adorn OU's new wrestling facility?

Port Robertson: A Sooner Sports Icon

BY JAY C. UPCHURCH

By the end of his first year as University of Oklahoma wrestling coach, Port Robertson literally had run off 14 of the 21 young men on the Sooner roster. By the end of his 14th and final season, his program had won three national championships and produced 15 individual NCAA champions.

A lot changed in between that initial season in 1947 and his parting in 1962. Through it all, Robertson remained constant, strong-willed, determined and knowledgeable—traits that impacted his own success and influenced his athletes far beyond the normal scope of collegiate competition.

Robertson is credited with turning around a once-proud program that found itself floundering for five seasons prior to going on hiatus for five years during World War II. Robertson's disciplined style provided the foundation for renewed success, and his uncompromising spirit helped make it a reality.

Almost 40 years later, the 85-year-old Robertson is still a hero for all generations of Sooner wrestlers. With the dedication of the new \$1 million Port Robertson Wrestling Center, his legacy is assured.

"We struggled along there those first few years," says Robertson, who took over the program in the fall of 1946 after earning the Bronze Star and Purple Heart for bravery as an artillery officer during the Allied Forces' Normandy invasion at Omaha Beach.

"Those first kids we had really didn't know about the work ethic

and dedication it took to be successful at that level," he says. "Without scholarships we really weren't able to recruit anyone, so we had to find a way to make things better."

Fortunately, Robertson had an ace up his sleeve in the person of University President George Lynn Cross, who just happened to be a wrestling enthusiast. Robertson went to Cross, who in turn met with athletic director and head football coach Bud Wilkinson.

"Dr. Cross was really our lifesaver. He had wrestled in college, so he had a built-in interest in the sport. And there was definitely a concern there," says Robertson, whose teams produced a 7-7 record during his first two seasons. "He told Bud he was tired of (Oklahoma A&M) beating up on us, and they came up with a plan to provide scholarship help.

"We had to split some of them and spread them around a little, but it was a step in the right direction."

The first scholarships went to the 1949 recruiting class, marking the beginning of what eventually would become the most successful era of wrestling in OU history. Three members of that class—Billy Borders, Joe Butler and Don Reece—went on to earn All-American honors.

Although the program's struggles continued in 1949 and 1950, the new plan took hold a year later, and the results were astounding. The underdog Sooners produced seven pins at the NCAA Tournament, giving them just enough points to win their first national title since 1936. Also, Tulsa native Phil Smith became OU's first individual champ in 11 years.



■ This portrait from Port Robertson's coaching days is destined for the gallery of Sooner sports legends in the O Club lounge.

"It was like we created an additional national champion with all of those pins," says Borders, who is now an attorney in his native Tulsa. "Those were tough years because the facilities were very poor, and Port was under a lot of pressure. But Port simply didn't abide losing, and he instilled that in his wrestlers."

Robertson, a noted disciplinarian who also served as freshman football coach and athletic counselor, was quick to credit Cross and Wilkinson for his program's about-face.

"Dr. Cross and Bud both had concerns for the total (athletic) program," says Robertson. "They wanted Oklahoma to compete at a high level in all sports. Both of them were dedicated to helping turn things around."

After losing to Oklahoma A&M (now Oklahoma State) six straight times during Robertson's first four seasons, the Sooners reversed their fortunes by beating the Aggies in

six consecutive meetings from 1951-53. Oklahoma successfully defended its national title in 1952, as Borders and teammate Tommy Evans led the way by winning individual titles. Under Robertson's leadership, the Sooners won nine conference titles, three NCAA championships and crowned a dozen national champions in the '50s.

They also laid the groundwork for plenty of future success.

Three-time NCAA champion Danny Hodge played a key role in the Sooners' return to elite status. The Perry native, who was 46-0 from 1955-57 and helped carry OU to the 1957 title, believes Robertson's legacy will stand the test of time.

"Port was worried about the new wrestling facility being named after him. He didn't think it would have the same meaning years from now," says Hodge. "But I told him 50 years from now they'll be saying the same

wonderful things about him they always have.

"Port, to me, was not only a coach and a friend, but he was like a father. He was always an individual you could look up to, and he had a hand in molding a lot of individual lives. He gave me lots of inspiration. I honestly don't have enough adjectives to describe Port."

While Robertson may have not been the most popular individual on campus because of his role as athletic department disciplinarian, his iron-fisted rule and genuine concern commanded respect. He was as adamant about academics as he was about ingraining a tireless work ethic among his athletes.

"A lot of people got mad at Port because he saw that they went to class and made sure they made their grades. But eventually they all come back with respect for the man," adds Hodge.

Robertson began wrestling at

win Big Six titles in 1935 and 1937. He had been on his way to a national title in 1935 when he first injured his neck in the championship match against Penn State's Howard Johnston and was forced to retire while leading 4-1.

That disappointment did not stop Robertson from graduating with a B.A. in history and pursuing a coaching career. His first job was as an assistant for Cliff Keen, Paul's younger brother, at the University of Michigan.

Robertson attended numerous coaching clinics and was an ardent student of the sport. So when he returned to Norman six years later, knowledge of the sport was not something he lacked.

"You never get too experienced where you can't learn something new; that's the way I always looked at it," the Harrah native says. "When I came back in 1946 after the service, I knew it was going to be

"... I think it was meaningful for everyone involved to see what kind of impact he has made over the years."

IMAGE IS NOT AVAILABLE ONLINE
DUE TO COPYRIGHT
RESTRICTIONS.

A paper copy of this issue is available
at call number LH 1 .O6S6 in Bizzell
Memorial Library.

Edmond High School in 1932, and he eventually landed a spot in Oklahoma's lineup under coach Paul V. Keen. Although his competitive career eventually was cut short by a neck injury he re-aggravated in the 1936 Olympic Trials, the 165-pound Robertson managed to

■ Although he questioned the wisdom of naming the new OU wrestling facility in his honor, Port Robertson surprised himself by having a wonderful time at the gathering of former Sooner wrestlers and other friends at the formal dedication.

rough. They revived the program, but wrestling really wasn't getting a fair shake. That's when Dr. Cross stepped in and really gave us a lift."

That was the push Robertson needed to help get the program back on its feet, and the Sooners have been going strong ever since. Robertson's lasting influence even helped raise funds for the new wrestling center that bears his name.

"It was meaningful for Port, and I think it was meaningful for everyone involved to see what kind of impact he has made over the years," says current OU coach Jack Spates. "There was a lot of emotion in the Field House during the center's dedication. Those emotions were earned by the discipline he installed in so many people and the high respect he earned from them.

"The best thing is Port was here to share this beautiful facility with us." 🍷